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Trucks, Copters Included in U.S. Aid to Contras

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WASHINGTON—The Reagan Administration's program of "humanitarian" aid for Nicaraguan rebels soon will move one step closer to military aid, buying trucks that can move guns and ammunition—as well as food and medicine—into the battle zones of northern Nicaragua, officials said Wednesday.

Key congressional Democrats objected to the shift, saying that it goes beyond guidelines negotiated between the Administration and the House and Senate Intelligence committees.

Since October, the United States has been paying for shipments of non-military equipment for the rebels, known as *contras*, but has not provided any transportation.

Trucks and Copters

Now, however, under an intelligence bill signed by President Reagan on Wednesday, the Administration also can pay for "transportation equipment."

Officials said that can include trucks, helicopters and even airplanes for the rebels who are fighting Nicaragua's Marxist regime, as long as none of the vehicles are outfitted for combat. But the key House Democrats maintained that that interpretation goes beyond the intent of Congress.

"This will allow them to transport weapons as well as humanitarian aid," a senior State Department official said. "If a truck carries 1,000 pounds of food and 500 pounds of guns, that will be fine."

He said the change was significant because the House and Senate agreed to it last month, reflecting what he called "steadily increasing support" for the *contras'* fight.

Budget of \$27 Million

"It's crystal-clear," the official said. "Congress has specifically OK'd this."

Much of the program's spending, based on a budget of \$27 million appropriated by Congress last year, will now shift to transportation and away from such things as medicine, clothing and food, he said.

But a congressional source said that the House had agreed to no such thing. "We agreed that transport of nonlethal aid is permissible," he said. "Transport of lethal equipment is not." Both sources refused to be quoted by name.

The Administration's aid to the rebels has spawned similar conflicts with Congress almost from the time Reagan first decided to provide covert military aid to the *contras* in 1981.

Congress cut off the rebels' funding in 1984 after it discovered that the CIA had mined Nicaragua's harbors and flown secret combat missions against the Sandinistas without notifying the committees in advance.

The aid was renewed last year under a law that restricted it to "humanitarian" aid—without clearly defining what could be included in that category.

The intelligence authorization bill, which passed with little opposition last month, stated that transportation equipment can be supplied as long as it is not designed "to inflict serious bodily harm or death."

"We agreed that it didn't make much sense to give them stuff and not have them able to move it to the people who need it," a spokesman for the Senate Intelligence

Committee said.

But both House and Senate sources said that the bill had not been intended to shift the use of U.S. aid substantially into transporting weapons.

"Some of it may go on, but it shouldn't change the nature of the program," a Senate source said.

A spokesman for the largest *contra* army, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, said his group wants to buy both trucks and helicopters with the funds. But he said the *contras* plan to wait until the Administration and Congress work out their differences before submitting a specific request.

Advice for Rebels

"The most important thing to us is the political consensus in Congress in favor of our cause, and we will not do anything that might jeopardize that," the Democratic Force spokesman, Bosco Matamoros, said.

When the intelligence bill was debated in the House, Intelligence Committee Chairman Lee H. Hamilton (D-Ind.) noted that it allows the CIA to provide information and advice to the rebels.

"However, training or any other activities—including advice—that amount to participation in the plan-

ning or execution of military activities by the *contras* . . . is prohibited," he said.

Under the bill, the CIA can give the *contras* information about Nicaraguan military movements gathered by U.S. surveillance flights and radio intercepts. Congress also authorized the CIA to provide the *contras* with sophisticated radios so they can receive that intelligence information quickly and in a coded form that the Sandinistas cannot overhear.

Reagan called the intelligence bill a "congressional vote of support" for the *contras* and "a recognition of the threat the repressive Sandinista regime in Managua poses to all the peoples of Central America."

"Although the Congress did not authorize the full program requested by the Administration to support the democratic forces in Nicaragua and to facilitate the reconciliation of the Nicaraguan people, the legislation is a positive step and furthers important United States policy objectives in this vital region," he said.

The bill was passed in the House by a lopsided 387-21 vote and approved in the Senate by voice vote.